

"Louise Bourgeois' Legs": Stuart Brisley's Anatomy of Art

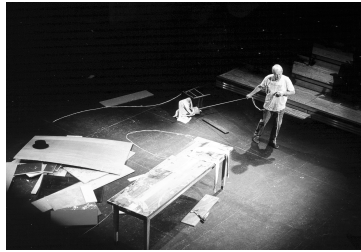
Garry Sherbert

It has been over a year now since I saw Stuart Brisley at the University of Regina's Shu-Box Theatre, and although the context has changed since October 28, 2000, the abiding context for the delightful irony and satire of "Louise Bourgeois' Legs" has been *Legs*, the written text that accompanied the performance. In fact, I was encouraged by Brisley to discuss the relationship between his various performances and the written text, a relationship that, while not acting as a script, gives the performances a narrative frame. Storytelling takes centre-stage in Brisley's performances, though the stories are clearly improvised in relation to the fictional histories found in the written text. I was told that the narratives preceded, and would grow out of, the performances of the Canadian tour. The tour began with the performance festival at Le Lieu in Quebec City, proceeded with the artist's lectures and performances in Regina, where Brisley was the guest of New Dance Horizons and the University of Regina Faculty of Fine Arts, and ended with the last leg in Dresden, Germany. I visited the website www.ordure.org in order to read the narratives that were available at the time, and received the completed version of *Legs* from Brisley before he left Regina.

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Given that performance art in its relatively short history has, through figures like Antonin Artaud,[1] rejected the domination of writing over performance, it is remarkable that Brisley has taken the risk of a new, complementary relationship by supplementing the stage with the page.



1. Stuart Brisley, 2000. *Louise Bourgeois’ Legs*

Having read a few reviews of the performances in Regina, I noticed that there has been no commentary on the written narratives and their relation to the performances nor, a matter of equal importance, on the satire in Brisley's work. The narratives on the website and the satire raise two questions about art for me: why would Brisley frame his performances using a narrative published in a technological medium; and why would he make it a principal theme in "Louise Bourgeois' Legs" to satirize the production of art which necessarily includes his own work?

My response to the first of these questions centres on the issue of prosthesis, or that of supplying a deficiency in the body by adding an artificial replacement. Brisley features a mannequin's leg on

stage that may or may not be the severed leg of Louise Bourgeois to represent the issue of prosthesis in a very condensed way. The second question can be answered by saying that Brisley exploits satire to investigate the relationship between disgust and art. Investigating a subject or theme exhaustively is a traditional technique in satire called an "anatomy" since the satirist analyses or dissects a given subject. Through the character of Rosse Yel Sirb, the "Curator of Ordure," or waste and excreta, Brisley explores the ways disgust goes to very origin of pure taste, or the conditions that make the beauty of art possible. In fact, Brisley discovers that the changing boundaries of disgust function as a resource for art by permitting it to add new objects to the pleasures of aesthetic experience. He conveys his interest in the changing boundaries of disgust through Rosse Yel Sirb's identification of art with pollution. The capacity of disgust to change its boundary, to replace the old with new polluted objects, links disgust to prosthesis. Indeed, the supplementary narrative added to the performance, taken with the concern for the affect of disgust in art, combines to form a parody of traditional aesthetics which we may call Brisley's prosthetic aesthetic.

A Prosthetic Aesthetic

If the body has always been the primary medium for performance art, Brisley extends that medium in "Louise Bourgeois' Leg" to the

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simulacrum of the body by placing a mannequin's leg centre stage. The leg on stage may or may not represent the leg of the well-known French sculptor and artist, Louise Bourgeois, who now lives in New York City. The title of the performance, however, authorizes us at least to entertain the idea that the leg is a metonymic substitute, part for whole, for the artist and her work. Bourgeois' work as a sculptor, painter, and performance artist invites comparison with Brisley's work, particularly her interest in images of the dismembered body. Brisley asks the audience to consider the way artists incorporate their life into the work of art, transforming their artistic corpus into a prosthetic body. He also invites us into the operating theatre to study the anatomy of the aesthetic object and assist him in supplying any deficiency we might find in the art work by cutting open and adding the artificial limb of our own commentary, a prosthesis like Louise Bourgeois' leg. Of course, nothing prevents the audience from adding the work to the theatre of memory for their own personal culture. The performance, which happens only once, must be repeated in living memory to have any aesthetic effect in this circuit of prosthetic subjects.

By displaying the severed leg of Louise Bourgeois, Brisley puts forward not just the leg as an aesthetic object, but the cut in the leg as well. The cut which severs the leg from the body suggests

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Jacques Derrida's notion of the *parergon*, or those ornamental, supplementary parts of the *ergon* or "work" of art, such as frames, and columns of a building, that make it possible to identify the work as art.[2] To conceive of the *parergon* as a cut is to think the difference between art and non-art, a difference which is supposed to guarantee for traditional Kantian aesthetics, the purity of art. Brisley's parody of traditional aesthetics will, however, challenge the purity of art that has its own intrinsic purpose. Art as pollution is tainted with very economic considerations that Kantian aesthetics is designed to protect it from. The cut in the severed leg challenges the purity of art by provoking in the audience the question of the leg's origin, its identity. The attempt to identify the severed leg represents the attempt to re-attach it to a body and thereby restore it at least symbolically to its original function or purpose. Since Kant defines art as "purposiveness without a purpose,"[3] the audience is engaged in an activity that contradicts the very notion of art as being cut off from any external purpose.

Grabbing the leg and speaking into a microphone hidden in the leg, the character of Rosse Yel Sirb ("Yel Sirb" is an anagram of "Brisley") says in a loud, amplified voice he is not sure whether the leg is that of Louise Bourgeois, Aleksey Stakhanov, or a Chinese action man doll. Having narrated stories of Louise Bourgeois, such as the rumour that she killed and cannibalized her

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father's body, he also narrates the story of the Soviet worker hero Aleksey Stakhanov. For instance, in 1935, the time of Stalin's reign, Stakhoanov cut 102 tons of coal in one shift in the Donbass region of the U.S.S.R. Attaching and reattaching the leg to one of these historical figures or the obviously artificial one of the Chinese action man doll simply calls attention to the prosthetic nature of the aesthetic object. The reference to the doll, furthermore, reminds us of the articulated joints of the human body that both join and separate the limbs calling into question the origin of prosthesis as something exterior to the natural body. Art, like the human body, is prosthetic at its origin.



2. Stuart Brisley, 2000. *Louise Bourgeois' Legs*

Art as Pollution, or the Anatomy of Disgust

The capacity of the aesthetic object to be cut off from the point of origin and re-attached to some new external context or purpose which serves to frame it contaminates the purity of art. Derrida in much of his work even argues that it is the ability of a thing to repeat itself which allows it to participate in the law or logic of contamination.[4] Brisley's identification of art with pollution

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relies on the logic of contamination to explain how the purity of the art object can become contaminated by exchange value and be reduced to a mere commodity. On the other hand, if art originates in the cut that separates art from non-art, then the work of art is never unified, or identical to itself, leaving something left over. This leftover, which Derrida calls in his French neologism "*restance*," and is translated as "remainder,"[5] accounts for Brisley's interest in the excess, or waste that makes all art possible. In the written text of *Legs*, Rosse Yel Sirb calls this contaminating power of repetition the "paradigm of redundancy re-use," referring to the character Bertrand Voilleme who collects waste to create art. The parergonal cut then acts like an orifice out of which the work of art as waste generates its power through repetition in different contexts to produce pleasure and much thought in those who appreciate art. This fascination for the orifice that produces the excessiveness and wastefulness of art manifests itself in Rosse Yel Sirb, the Curator of Ordure, and shit. Invoking the Medieval world of alchemy, Sirb wants to raise the collection of shit to the value of art.

Holding out a part of an unfinished sandwich Rosse Yel Sirb points out that food loses its appeal after a time and says, "Sometimes food looks like shit, and sometimes shit has the memory of food." The disgusting aspect of this statement is that

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the purity of the category of edible food is being contaminated with another category of waste. When he brings out his collection of shit and places it carefully on a table, the Curator is simply carrying on his program of pollution from food to the socially accepted category of art. When he parodies the British national anthem as he did in Montreal and Regina, he is polluting the purity associated with some political rituals, which in this case is the sanctity of the monarchy with republicanism. Brisley's satire, as with all satire, evokes infectious laughter--the release of repressed energy--in some contexts and disgust or contempt in others.

The improvisational aspect of performance art, however, demands that the work of art live on the edge of its various contexts. Robin Poitras, (Artistic Director of New Dance Horizons) who appears on stage with Brisley in Regina, hones the edge of Brisley's satire when, as she confessed to me later, she forgets her glasses and cannot read the narratives she was supposed to read during the performance. Her virtual blindness becomes a metaphor for improvisation, which means "unforeseen." To improvise on her blindness, Poitras stands on a chair that is on a table and follows Brisley, who is pacing slowly back and forth, with a plank of wood. The plank of wood has a piece of shit on the end which acts like a finger taunting Brisley behind his back, rendering him blind too. Poitras defies the characters of the written script as Louise

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Bourgeois herself is said to have defied her own father's patriarchal authority. Under Brisley's paradigm of redundancy re-use, Poitras has found a way to put the uselessness of her blindness and the shit back into use. She is not the only one who has been touched, even tainted, by the alchemy of Brisley's art.

Notes

1. See Jacques Derrida's essay on Antonin Artaud: "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
2. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian Macleod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54-55.
3. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 302.
4. Richard Beardsworth, "Nietzsche and the Machine," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (7, 1994), 56.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, ed Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 52-53.

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